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Enhancing Conversations with English Language Learners in Communication Centers

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Communication centers often focus on supporting students' communicative competencies in public speaking through targeted feedback on outlines and in simulated practice sessions. Some communication centers have expanded this focus to include support for English language learners (ELLs). The University Speaking Center at the College has incorporated peer consulting of ELLs, known as conversation consultations, into its offered services and have evolved over time through a collaborative process with student staff, English language instructors, and ELLs. In efforts to be both effective and responsive to their needs, conversation consultations have developed into a multifaceted model of service for ELLs at different levels of language acquisition. This case study offers insights and recommendations for colleges and universities with communication centers and those with a large ELL population for how to structure conversation consultations to support learners in their language acquisition.

As the United States is becoming more ethnically and culturally diverse, so is the population enrolling in colleges and universities. In 2018/19, the total number of international students in the United States increased by 0.05% to 1,095,299 students (IIE, 2019). International student recruitment is becoming integral to the financial health of many institutions of higher education in the United States (Chondaha & Chang, 2012) as foreign students pay on average twice or more the tuition fees paid by national students (Sanchez-Serra & Marconi, 2018). More international students means more support for this population on college campuses. International ELLs might look for resources on their campus that offer additional oral communication help and support outside of their academic programs. Armed with research on the value of conversation in language acquisition, we argue that communication centers—which have seen less research in this realm—have many linguistic benefits to offer ELLs and can better utilize their center to support this demographic.

Conversation for Communicative Competence

The goal of many adult and postsecondary-level ELLs is not only to increase knowledge of the components of a language (including reading and writing skills), but also to increase communicative competence (Sun, 2014; Walsh, 2014). In application to second language acquisition (SLA), conversation serves as an important tool for acquiring communicative competence in a second language (L2) (Mackey, 2007; Verga & Kotz, 2013). [1]

[1] While the terms *second language acquisition (SLA)* and *second language (L2)* are used throughout these sections due to their common use in the relevant literature, we acknowledge that many language

Communicative competence refers to the ability to accomplish speech acts and take part in speech events (Hymes, 1972). Conversation plays a crucial role in the cultivation of communicative competence. Social learning theory (Vygotsky, 1978) places interaction—e.g. conversation—as central to all learning. The theory suggests that higher-order functions develop from social interactions, especially interactions between individuals at different stages of the learning process. Some SLA scholars have proposed an alternative to or extension of communicative competence, focusing on interactional competence (He & Young, 1998; Kramsch, 1986; Young, 1999 & 2011). The theory of interactional competence includes not only an increased focus on pragmatics (or the unwritten rules of social interaction) but also an understanding of "social, institutional, political, and historical circumstances that extend beyond the horizon of a single interaction" (Young, 1999, p. 428).

According to Canale and Swain's (1980) model of communicative competence, an individual's language capabilities can be classified into three chief components:

- grammatical competence (vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation)
- sociolinguistic competence (rules for using language appropriately)
- strategic competence (verbal and nonverbal strategies used in compensation with communication breakdown)

Native speaker–non-native speaker (NS-NNS)[2] conversations hold the potential for engaging ELLs in all three of these communicative competencies. First, NS-NNS conversation provides an environment for applying, practicing, and attaining grammatical competence: ELLs can learn and negotiate meanings of L2 vocabulary through conversational practice (Ellis, 1994; Hwang, 2009; Jung, 2004), conversations can provide sites for L2 pronunciation practice (Brouwer, 2004), and negotiation processes during conversation can aid in the learning of L2 syntax (Linnell, 1995; Newton, 1996).

In addition to grammatical competence, conversation provides the means for sociolinguistic competence, which Canale and Swain (1980) divide into two subcategories: discourse competence (understanding the rules governing cohesion and coherence) and sociocultural competence (understanding the relation of language to specific contexts). Regarding conversation's role in discourse competence, the interaction creates the opportunity to negotiate which in turn provides language learners with increased chances to acquire target discourse conventions and practice higher level communicative skills (Cook, 2015; Pica, 1994). Conversation also provides an ideal environment for the use of sociocultural attributes. Conversation calls for engagement in the following sociolinguistic competencies: turn taking, turn organization, sequence organization, word usage/selection, and repair (Al-wossabi, 2016; Markee & Seo, 2009;

learners are learning a third, fourth, or additional language.

[2] Here the term "native speaker" and "nonnative speaker" are used in this paper when discussing literature which utilizes these terms. While much SLA literature has synonymized "native speaker" with "expert speaker", we acknowledge that a non-native speakers may too posses the communicative competence an psycholinguistic confidence of a native speaker (Davies 2003, 2013); thus, an expert speaker from whom an ELL can benefit conversationally need not be a native speaker of the target language.

Schegloff, Koshik, Jacoby, & Olsher, 2002; Seo, 2011).

Informal conversation practice allows ELLs to engage in organization of repair, or the practices used for interrupting conversation, to address problems of understanding (Schegloff, 1997, 2007; Schegloff, Jefferson, & Sacks, 1977). There are two primary forms of conversational repair: self-initiated repair, which is initiated by the speaker of the trouble source, and other-initiated repair, which is initiated by someone other than the speaker of the trouble source (Seo & Koshik, 2010). Several types of errors necessitate repair during NS-NNS conversations. Most prominent are word choice errors, syntactic errors, factual errors, and discourse errors, which include inappropriate openings and closings of a conversation, inappropriate refusals, incorrect topic nominations or switches, and pauses (Chun, Day, Chenoweth, & Luppescu, 1982). As a result, NNSs typically engage in repair by means of restatement, clarification, and confirmation of information (Foster & Ohta, 2005; Long, 1983 & 1996; Pica, 1994).

Along with the many verbal sociocultural competencies exercised in conversation practice, the conversation setting allows for the application of numerous nonverbal competencies. Conversation commonly incorporates and/or relies on the use of nonlinguistic modes of communication, many of which are culturally and situationally bound (Churchill, Okada, Nishino, & Atkinson, 2010; Matsumoto & Hwang, 2017). These include nonlinguistic embodied modes of semiosis such as gesture, eye contact, facial expression, silence, and body movement/orientation (Churchill et al., 2010). Gestures are extremely culturally bound. As a result, the use of nonverbals in NS-NSS conversations has been shown to lead to miscommunication when cultural implications of the nonverbals are misunderstood. For example, in her discussion of intercultural eye behavior, Gregersen (2007) explains:

> "Language learners who are not familiar with the cultural codes of eye behavior in western countries and divert their gaze for other reasons dictated by their L1 culture (such as showing respect for authority, for example) may find themselves sending the wrong message both in the classroom and outside that they do not want to participate in a conversation" (p. 60).

As such, is it important that nonverbals are incorporated into pedagogical approaches to SLA (Gregersen, 2007; Gullberg, 2008; McCafferty, 2002 & 2004), and NS-NNS conversations provide an important site for learning, discussing, and practicing these nonverbals.

As a whole, conversation provides an effective means for ELLs to acquire all three communicative competencies, as opposed to learning them. Acquisition occurs subconsciously and is motivated by a focus on communication, whereas learning is motivated by a focus on form and results in metalinguistic knowledge (Nagle & Sanders, 1986). The goal of informal approaches such as conversation, is acquisition which is achieved through engaging ELLs in the process of "actual communication by emphasizing the use of language as a means to some behavioral end" (Ellis, 1982, p. 80). Conversation offers an informal environment where ELLs face 'real-life' communicative situations, such as greetings and closures, comparisons, problem-solving, and informal debate. Swain (1995) argues that interaction gives ELLs opportunities to command the elements of the new language and apply them, providing chances for using these elements freely and unconsciously.

Finally, with regard to interactional competence, conversation practice provides ELLs with the opportunity to apply communicative competence within various social contexts (Young, 1999 & 2011). Because all linguistic communication involves "the establishment of a triangular relationship between the sender, the receiver, and the context of situation" (Wells, 1980, p. 46), it is important for ELLs to have the opportunity to practice different conversational genres and scenarios (Young, 2011).

Significance of Peer NS-NNS Conversation

Literature in SLA and educational psychology shows how student–student interactions (i.e., peer interactions) are quantitatively and qualitatively different from teacher–student interactions (Siegel & Seedhouse, 2019; Swain, Brooks, & Tocalli-Beller, 2002). In peer groups, the interaction tends to be associated with sense making, meaning negotiating, and joint problem-solving activities, and no specific member of the group is responsible for the control and direction of interaction (Gillies, 2006; Mercer, 1996). Thus, the opportunities for substantive conversation appear to be greater in small peer groups than in teacher-controlled class discussions (Zhengdong, Davison, & Hamp-Lyons, 2008). In situations where peers share roughly equal status and responsibility for the conversation, the talk which ensues can be freed from the limited type of question–answer series. In an educational setting, it also becomes the responsibility of the group to move the discussion forward, but to do so in ways compatible with the educational requirements of the task. Thus, peer-group classroom talk is like everyday talk in that it is collaboratively managed, but like institutional talk in its predetermined aim (Fisher, 1997).

Just as peer interactions are different from student–teacher interactions, native-speaker–nonnative-speaker (NS-NNS) conversations offer significant differences from nonnative-speaker–nonnative-speaker (NNS-NNS) conversations. Sociocultural theory tells us that learners have the ability to internalize new linguistic knowledge by imitating expressions of an 'expert' to create their own utterances (Vygotsky, 1986, 1997). SLA literature has shown that the language learner's progress depends upon the input; and that native speakers provide comprehensible input (Krashen, 1981, 1985; Long, 1983). Framing this process using sociocultural theory, Timpe-Laughlin (2016) explains:

> "knowledge is created in the interaction between an expert (a more advanced speaker of the target language) and a novice (a learner). The expert mediates the interaction, enabling the learner to perform a task which he or she would not have been able to accomplish alone. Learning unfolds in this mediated interaction as the learner imitates and eventually dynamically internalizes the new knowledge…" (p. 3)

While conversations between non-native speakers can certainly contribute to language learning (Pica & Doughty, 1985; Varonis & Gass, 1985), conversations with native speakers may provide more opportunities for learning via 'expert' input (Krashen, 1981, 1985; Long 1983; Timpe-Laughlin, 2016).

Peer tutoring is an effective way to help meet the needs of ELLs at the post-secondary level (Bruce & Rafoth, 2016; Thonus, 1993; Williams, 2002, 2004). When working with tutors who are native (or highly-proficient) speakers of English, ELLs have the opportunity for SLA at a lower

level of consciousness through natural conversation, as well as through a higher level of consciousness via the tutor's explanation of linguistic concepts. Additionally, one-on-one tutoring provides an educational space that may feel more egalitarian than teacher-student spaces. When tutors work closely and collaboratively with students, barriers between those who have knowledge/power and those without begin to break down, especially with consultants increasingly turning over control of the session to the speakers themselves (Nelson, 1991). For example, many ELLs are often hesitant to speak up in class because doing so in their home countries may be considered disrespectful to the teacher (Healy & Bosher, 1992); tutoring provides a space for crucial language engagement and negotiation in which many students may not otherwise take part. Being connected with other people facilitates language development (Hasegawa, 2019). Growing research on writing centers' work with ELLs continues to show benefits of one-on-one (and group) writing tutoring in the postsecondary setting, especially when differences between L1 and L2 writers are taken into account (Severino & Deifell, 2011; Severino & Prim, 2016; Song & Richter, 1997; Thonus, 2009; Williams 2002, 2004).

Conversation Consultations at the University Speaking Center

The University Speaking Center at College opened in 2002 as part of Communication Across the Curriculum, a cross-departmental program. The center provides assistance in traditional public speaking along with support to ELLs. This case study looks into how the University Speaking Center created specialized conversation consultations for ELLs in one of The College's international programs and how these consultations became more individualized and eventually branched out to serve a broader ELL population. Though at times challenges and missteps forced changes to the consultation process, the motivation to support speakers in their ongoing process of becoming more confident and competent oral communicators was always in the forefront.

In its initial phase, the conversation consultation was loosely structured. ELLs would meet with consultants for thirty minutes to practice speaking English. These initial consultations generally consisted of the consultant first asking if the student had a preference for conversation focus. Sometimes, the student would request information on practical matters such as where to get a haircut, restaurant suggestions, and traversing the city while other students would have coursework for which they were seeking assistance or practice. More often, consultants were left to lead the conversation, which typically involved them asking the student questions about their home country and culture. Not only did this not engage ELLs in multiple types of communicative competencies, this also led to a common complaint: that students were having similar conversations over and over again with different consultants.

Adding to the repetitiveness of the conversations was a disconnect between the centers' mission and what students felt was the determined point of the consultations. Often, students were seeking assistance with grammar, pronunciation, and accent reduction. These skills, however, were not the focus of these consultations. The purpose of these consultations was to provide ELLs with a nonacademic environment to practice and gain confidence speaking in English -- to increase

communicative competence through interpersonal peer communication. Correcting their grammar and pronunciation or critiquing their accents would change the power dynamic in the conversation where the consultant was no longer a peer, but an authority. For instruction in these areas, students would need to examine their academic curriculum and consult with their English language instructors.

Armed with feedback from students who participated in these initial consultations, members of the University Speaking Center and staff within the international program met and discussed ways in which the conversation consultation could be improved. In order to reduce confusion with the students in regard to consultation expectations, the University Speaking Center crafted informative welcome letters for each student and began performing orientation presentations (introduction to the services offered) prior to the students' first consultation. The letters and orientations emphasized the purpose of the conversations were to provide an opportunity to engage conversationally with native speakers in order to enhance confidence in English speaking. In addition, the orientations emphasized the idea of the Speaking Center as a safe space to openly discuss the differences and difficulties international students confront in the city, at the College, and within the greater community.

With its purpose more clearly articulated, the conversation consultation evolved to emphasize an individualized focus. Though the consultant's priority was to first give conversational choice to the student, often—as previously discussed—students entered the consultation without a specific direction of interest in conversation. Therefore, specialized tip sheets were created to expand consultants' discussion topics when not provided guidance by the speaker. These were tangible pieces of paper that a consultant could bring into the consultation to give them more confidence to engage in a meaningful dialogue. One particular tip sheet included over thirty possible conversation starters to encourage students to share their perspectives on a broad swath of interest areas such as relationships and travel (see Appendix).

Many tip sheets addressed sociolinguistic competence (rules for using language appropriately), such as culturally appropriate nonverbal behaviors, or topics that should and should not be discussed with someone you just met. Other tip sheets addressed strategic competence (verbal and nonverbal strategies used in compensation with communication breakdown), such as asking for clarification when having difficulty understanding an English speaker. The variety of tip sheets allowed for a variety of conversational contexts to be explored metalinguistically by ELLs, providing an engaging and low-risk context for ELLs to increase interactional competency.

The introduction of these tip sheets allowed for greater engagement and culture sharing than had previously been evident in conversation consultations. In addition to promoting participation and conversational agency on the part of the student, the tip sheets provided a more concrete structure for consultants. Though their use increased the satisfaction of both speakers and consultants, criticism remained that the conversations could repeat themselves as speakers visited on different days/times and spoke with different consultants.

The following year, a new Speaker Tracking program was instituted to ensure that conversations were evolving rather than repeating. A folder was created for each student and participated in conversation

consultations and contained a tracking form stapled to the inside of the folder. The form included columns for the purpose of the consultation, topics discussed, and goals for the next visit. In addition, the forms were differentiated by communication skill (CS) level, 1-5, which coincided with the students' level of English language acquisition from beginner to advanced. Though the forms assisted in the development of conservations for an individual, they also brought a new consciousness to consultants. Each time a consultant prepared for a conversation consultation, they could prepare for the communication skill level of the speaker. The recognition of different skill/acquisition levels led to several changes that would further enhance the conversations.

Students in the lower levels are still mastering simple language and dialogues. By tracking students with these associated level labels, the staff began to recognize consistent difficulties with students at these levels. One major hurdle was the online feedback survey, which all speakers are asked to complete at the end of their consultation. Typically, the speaker will answer quantitative and qualitative questions about their visit. However, staff noticed that students in the lower levels were struggling to understand and complete the survey. As a result, an alternative paper feedback form was created which simplified the language of the questions and included the use of different emoji faces to coincide with the likert scale questions. For example, a smiling face emoji replaced the words 'strongly agree' on the survey and a sad face emoji replaced 'strongly disagree'. The use of the simple survey reduced the time students took to complete the survey as well as lessened speaker anxiety as they did not have to constantly ask the consultant what a word meant.

Students in the middle and higher levels of language acquisition have a broader grasp of the English language and are often more confident in their speaking abilities. Conversations with these students were often more natural and the cultural exchange more organic and could also take the form of non-ELL consultations, such as a focus on traditional public speaking skills. In order to continue enhancing conversations with international students in their English learning, the center started implementing high-level conversation activities open to any student who wanted to enjoy fun and games while speaking English and learning from one another. This one hour program called "Let's Talk" (first called "Coffee Talk"), is a weekly event facilitated by consultants to allow for large groups of ELLs and fluent English speakers to engage with one another while playing games such as answering questions on a beach ball that thrown around the room or adapting popular television game shows such as 'Family Feud'.

Feedback

Since the implementation of the Speaker Tracking program, which follows conversation topics and recognizes students as individuals at a variety of language acquisition/skill levels, feedback from students has steadily improved and no longer receives criticism that conversations are repetitive. As the focus has moved to diversifying conversation dynamics, feedback on the level of perceived help has also improved. During the 2018-2019 academic year, feedback was collected from 363 conversation consultations. 99.7% of students felt their conversation consultations were helpful and 97.7% would recommend the Speaking Center to others. During the 2019-2020 academic year, conversation consultations revealed similar satisfaction

with 97.7% of speakers indicating the consultation was helpful and 97.6% recommendation rate.

While the quantitative data is impressive, the qualitative responses were far more telling. In response to the question for the "most important thing learned", responses have ranged in topics from American past times and TV shows, to learning new vocabulary, to social norms (e.g. not asking someone's age); one student remarked that the conversation provided help in explaining their pain to a doctor. A common thread in response to what the speaker found most helpful was simply the opportunity to speak to native English speakers in a safe environment and the feeling of greater comfort with the English language.

Highlights of Speaker Responses

Below is a sampling of some of the 2018-2020 open-ended feedback from conversation consultations about the most important thing learned during their visit. Responses are unedited/verbatim and reflect a variety of skill levels.

- Sharing with people what I think. Don't be shy
- Use different styles to grape student attention
- Celebration of valentines day
- Education system
- How to do a good presentation
- How to start my speech and how to including
- About slang language
- How to use the word "sleep" in sentences
- More about how to practice for my presentation
- I don't have to eat food before central carolina fair
- How to find main point, give more detail for presentation
- How to response to the question "do you mind"
- Spelling and practicing speaking

Here we see responses spanning the grammatical competence (e.g. 'Spelling', 'How to use the word "sleep" in sentences') and sociolinguistic competence (e.g., 'About slang language', 'How to response [sic] to the question "do you mind"'), as well as interactional competencies related to speaking context ('Use different styles to grape [sic] student attention', 'How to start my speech', 'Sharing with people what I think') and using conversation to better understand cultural and institutional histories (e.g., 'Celebration of valentines day', 'Education system').

Moving Forward

Communication centers were created to assist communication across the curriculum programs to give support for oral communication activities and assignments (Preston, 2006) and can increase the opportunities for pursuing speaking proficiency (Hobgood, 2000). We must also recognize that ELLs need oral communication support and communication centers have the opportunity to skillfully engage with ELLs to further support their oral communication goals and language acquisition. By centering the individual (adapting to their needs and being reactive to their feedback) and focusing on communicative competence, we enhance conversations with ELLs and become more meaningful to both the consultant and the speaker.

However, just as the consultation's evolution from its inception has brought great improvements, one must look toward future adaptations of application at a communication center such as conversation beyond academic settings. Some speaker feedback also indicated interest in spouses

and/or child(ren) to be able to participate in conversation consultations. In addition, outreach to refugee populations in the local community may offer an opportunity to have a greater scale of impact through serving a wider range of ELLs. The Speaking Center at College continues to move forward to provide conversation consultations and other programming to international students and provides itself as a case study for how other communication centers can enhance their conversations with ELLs.

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Appendix

Interesting Conversation Questions

Habits:

- What are some good habits to have?
- What are your healthy eating habits?
- What are your bad eating habits?
- What are your good study habits?
- What are your bad study habits?
- Where do we learn our habits?
- What are some of your bad habits?

Love, Dating and Marriage:

- What are some traditional dating and marriage customs in your home country?
- Where are some popular places to go on a date?
- What are some qualities that you think are important in a spouse or partner?
- What are your views on living with your parents after getting married?
- What are your views on marrying someone from another country?
- What are your views on possibly dating/marrying someone ten years older than you? Ten years younger than you?

Mind and Body:

- What do you do to relax after a hard day's work?
- How do you handle challenging or stressful situations?
- Do you think life is more stressful today than 10 years ago? 50 years ago?
- What causes you stress?
- How does stress affect you?
- How do you keep your mind sharp in order to focus?

Ghosts, Supernatural and Superstitions:

- Do you know any good stories about ghosts?
- Do you know anyone who has said that they have seen a ghost?
- Why do some people consult psychics before doing important things?
- How do people predict the future in your home country?
- Do you think that dreams come true?
- Do you think that some people can predict the future? Why or why not?
- Do you have any superstitions or know anyone who does? If so, what are they?

Travel:

- Describe the most interesting person you met while travelling.
- What was your best trip?
- What was your worst trip?
- Have you ever gotten lost while traveling? If so, tell me about it.
- Would you prefer to travel with your friends or your family? Why?
- If you had $1,000, where would you go on vacation? How about if you had $10,000? What about $100,000?